

Shabbat Shirah 5786

31 JANUARY 2026 · PARASHAT B'SHALACH

The first time I sang at Fenway Park was also my son Max's first baseball game. He was not yet three. Of the many memories I retain from that night, my favourite had nothing to do with the game itself. Though Max had watched many baseball games on TV with his Red Sox obsessed father, I couldn't possibly prepare him for everything that he would encounter in person at Fenway Park.

We were sitting close to the field, about six rows behind home plate. A few innings into the game, Max started pulling on my sleeve, urgently. I looked at him and said, "What's up, Maxie?" And he asked a question that could only be asked in Boston: "Papi, what's WATAH?"

At first, I had no idea what he was talking about. Was it a code word? Did he see something? Then I realized I had completely tuned out a constant part of the Fenway Park soundtrack: the never-ending stream of concessionaires passing up and down the aisles, with their own special brand of regional advertising.

I chuckled to myself and said, "Max, it's water."

He gave me the most perplexed look a three-year-old can muster, and then his follow-up question: "Why do they call it that here?"

It was a good observation because aside from the issue of the famed Boston accent, there is a deeper question that's central to our parasha this week: What is water? What is its nature? What powers does it have, to inspire, to transform?

Much of this week has been about water, mostly the white and frozen kind. To borrow a line from Danny Rojas in *Ted Lasso*: "Water is life." We gestate in it, we are mostly comprised of it. We can be cleansed and made healthy by it, or it can contaminate and drown us. We fly over it, swim through it, skate on it, or Chunnel under it. It is both a blessing and curse, as evidenced by the optimistic springtime prayer for dew and the foreboding autumnal prayer for rain. We can't live without it, and at times we can't live with it either.

Twice in today's layning, we hear וַיִּשְׂמְרוּ אֶל־הַיָּם, "The waters were a wall to the left and the right" of the Red Sea pedestrians. If you peek at page 457 in see this beautifully conveyed in the printing convention that has become standard in most prayerbooks. It mimics the brickwork pattern in which the Shirah is written in the Torah scroll. Seven lines up from the bottom of the page is the last verse of Shirat Hayam and if you read it, you will see the words וַיִּבְנֶי יִשְׂרָאֵל הֶלֶבֶט בַּיַּבְשָׁה בְּתוֹךְ, and tl dry land through... bookended on either side by the word יָם־הַיָּבֵל, the sea.

When I think of those walls of water surrounding the Israelites, I am also reminded that the Hebrew word for water, Mayim (מַיִם), is a palindrome, the letter Yud sandwiched between two Mem's. But there is a deeper meaning, given the fact that Mayim is written with two different letters Mem: the Open Mem (מֶ) at the beginning and the Closed Mem Sofit (ם) at the end.

Throughout Jewish history — whether it's the Red Sea or the Mikvah, the Exodus or the Altalena, Jonah or Noah — a passage through water is a journey of transformation. Like the letters Mem, the journey through doesn't allow you to go back to exactly who you were before. It is this concept of transformation, of Mayim, that connects me to a different place: my family homeland of the Netherlands.

The Netherlands literally translates to "Low Lands." How low? About 26% of the country is below sea level, and roughly half of its total land area is less than one meter above it. The whole country is basically a continuous, ongoing miracle of aquatic engineering, held together by dikes, dunes, and windmills. Without a sophisticated system of protection, major cities like Amsterdam, Rotterdam, and The Hague would be, to put it simply, WATAH.

Many of you know, some of you may not, that I am half Dutch. There's actually a Dutch legal term for what I am: "Latent Dutch." It means that I could have claimed Dutch citizenship because at the time of my birth, my mother was Dutch. But I didn't.

Instead, I inherited the best parts of being Dutch: a profound love of cheese and chocolate, a loyalty to those bright orange uniforms during every World Cup, and a natural ability to flawlessly pronounce letters that make a CHHHH sound in any language.

The Dutch are a people defined by their tenuous relationship with water. My Oma and Opa, who lived in The Hague, made sure that I had a healthy appreciation for my Dutch roots. My Opa, Benno, took great joy in touring my brother and me around his beloved country, always pointing out the ingenious infrastructure that kept the seas at bay. And my maternal grandfather's family, the Familie Levisson, was at the forefront of the efforts to re-establish a Jewish presence on those low lands after the Shoah nearly drowned Dutch Jewry.

Holland's Jewish presence dates back to the Middle Ages, but the Liberal movement was a relative newcomer to Holland, founded in 1931 by a group of progressive-minded individuals led by my great-grandfather, Levie Levisson. His Hebrew name was Yehuda, a name that our son Ben now carries.

Levie was the owner of a printing house in The Hague, Drukkerij Levisson, and he was the primary catalyst for establishing a modern, liberal alternative to the traditional Orthodox Judaism that had dominated the Dutch landscape throughout the 19th century. His vision was significantly shaped by a business trip to London in 1929. During this visit, a friend took him to the Liberal Jewish Synagogue at St. John's Wood.

Impressed by the decorum and modern approach, he returned to Holland determined to create a similar space for Dutch Jews. Levie believed that Dutch Judaism must adapt to contemporary language and social norms, or it would lose the next generation. His Liberaal Joodse Gemeente, Liberal Jewish Congregation, or LJG for short, presented a service that integrated the Dutch language, with Dutch sermons and readings. He published a prayer book with Dutch translations, and he sermonized in Dutch, addressing modern ethical and social issues.

Before 1933, the Liberal communities in The Hague and Amsterdam were quite small, however, once Hitler came to power, the Netherlands became a primary destination for German Jews. Between 1933 and 1940, roughly 34,000 Jewish refugees entered the country. Tragically, the very growth that bolstered the LJG in the 1930s also made it a target. Many of the German refugees were among the first to be arrested and deported to Dutch transit camps like Westerbork. When the war was over, The Hague's Jewish community was devastated — reduced from about 17,000 Jews to only 2,000 survivors. The pre-war Liberal congregation was effectively destroyed.

Levie died in 1948, and his son Robert (Bob) Levisson inherited his father's mantle of communal leadership. Bob re-established the Liberal congregation in 1959 and it

steadily regenerated to the point that in the early 1970s, the LJG was rapidly outgrowing its meeting spaces. It needed a permanent home. Sadly, yet fortunately, one was available: the historic "Snoge" synagogue on the Prinsessegracht, one of the most historically significant buildings in The Hague. Consecrated on August 9, 1726, it was originally the home of the Portuguese Jewish congregation. The interior was a miniature version of the famous Portuguese Synagogue ("The Esnoga") in Amsterdam.

During the Nazi occupation, while most synagogues in the Netherlands were plundered or destroyed, the building on the Prinsessegracht survived the war remarkably intact. After the Holocaust, the Portuguese Jewish community in The Hague was so decimated that it was eventually dissolved. The building fell into disuse and stood abandoned for many years. The LJG acquired the building in 1974 and following a major restoration, the building was rededicated on September 3, 1976, as Beth Jehoeda, after my great-grandfather, Yehuda Levie Levisson. This year, the building celebrates its 300th anniversary.

In 2002, the Levisson Institute was established in Amsterdam as the primary training center for rabbis, cantors, and lay leaders within the Dutch Progressive community. The Institute ordained its first class of Dutch-trained liberal rabbis in 2008 in that same historic sanctuary. The transformation of The Hague's Liberal Jewish community, from its fledgling roots through the rough waters of the Shoah, to its rebirth on the other side, was now complete.

Holland's cantorial tradition is not as well-known as some of its Western European neighbours, but I'm proud of what we have. This morning, the Eitz Chayim Hi that I sang was written by Cantor Victor Schlesinger. Schlesinger served the Rapenburg Synagogue in Amsterdam from 1908 until 1923. Interestingly, in the only published volume of his music, his bio notes that in 1913, he declined an offer to become cantor of Congregation Shaar Hashomayim. I sang that Eitz Chayim Hi in Beth Jehoeda three weeks ago, in the presence of three generations of Levisson descendants: my uncle Frans Levisson, Bob Levisson's son Lex, and Max.

Standing together with my son in the historic synagogue named after his great-great-grandfather was a spiritual journey in a land defined by its relationship to water, and I certainly have come back feeling changed. In this week of both Shabbat Shirah and International Holocaust Remembrance Day, I am proud to say that the experience of visiting Holland together with Max affirmed for me what the palindrome of Mayim suggests: our journeys, whether by choice or necessity, may force us to change, but what is in the center and at our core remains constant. So may it be, from generation to generation, and for all time.

Shabbat Shirah Shalom.